The generation game

In just a few decades childhood has changed out of all recognition, says Barbara Beck. What does that mean for children, parents and society at large?

"When I was a kid, we were out and about all the time, playing with our friends, in and out of each other's houses, sandwich in pocket, making our own entertainment. Our parents hardly saw us from morning to night. We didn't have much stuff, but we came and went as we liked and had lots of adventures." This is roughly what you will hear if you ask anyone over 30 about their childhood in a rich country. The adventures were usually of a homely kind, more Winnie the Pooh than Star Wars, but the freedom and the companionship were real.

Today such children will spend most of their time indoors, often with adults rather than with siblings or friends, be supervised more closely, be driven everywhere rather than walk or cycle, take part in many more organised activities and, probably for several hours every day, engage with a screen of some kind. All this is done with the best of intentions. Parents want to protect their offspring from traffic, crime and other hazards in what they see as a more dangerous world, and to give them every opportunity to flourish.

And indeed in many ways children are better off than they were a generation or two ago. Child mortality rates even in rich countries are still dropping. Fewer kids suffer neglect or go hungry. They generally get more attention and support from their parents, and many governments are offering extra help to very young children from disadvantaged backgrounds. As adolescents, fewer become delinquents, take up smoking and drinking or become teenage parents. And more of them finish secondary school and go on to higher education.

The children themselves seem fairly happy with their lot. In a survey across the OECD in 2015, 15-year-olds were asked to rate their satisfaction with their life on a scale from zero to ten. The average score was 7.3, with Finnish kids the sunniest, at nearly 7.9, and Turkish ones the gloomiest, at 6.1. Boys were happier than girls, and children from affluent families scored higher than the rest.

That is not surprising. Prosperous parents these days, especially in America, invest an unprecedented amount of time and money in their children to ensure that they will do at least as well as the parents themselves have done, and preferably better. Those endless rounds of extra tutoring, music lessons, sports sessions and educational visits, together with lively discussions at home about every subject under the sun, have proved highly effective at securing the good grades and social graces that will open the doors to top universities and well-paid jobs.

Working-class parents in America, for their part, lack the wherewithal to engage in such intensive parenting. As a result, social divisions from one generation to the next are set to widen. Not so long ago the "American dream" held out the prospect that everyone, however humble their background, could succeed if they tried hard enough. But a recent report by the World Bank showed that intergenerational social mobility (the chance that the next generation will end up in a different social class from the previous one) in the land of dreams is now among the lowest in all rich countries. And that is before many of the social effects of the new parenting gap have had time to show up yet.

Tell me the ways

This special report will explain what has led to these momentous changes in childhood in America and other rich countries, as well as in middle-income China. They range from broad social and demographic trends such as urbanisation, changes in family struc-

ture and the large-scale move of women into the labour force in recent decades to a shifting emphasis in policy on the early years and the march of digital technology.

Start with the physical environment in which children are growing up. In rich countries the overwhelming majority now lead urban lives. Almost 80% of people live in cities, which have many advantages, including better opportunities for work, education, culture and leisure. But these often come at a cost: expensive housing, overcrowding, lack of green space, heavy traffic, high air pollution and a sense of living among strangers rather than in a close-knit community. This has caused a perception of growing danger, even though crime in Western countries in the past few decades has declined, so statistically the average child is actually safer.

Even more important, the domestic environment for most children has changed profoundly. Families have become smaller, and women bear children far later than they did only a couple of generations ago. In the vast majority of rich countries the average number of children a woman will have is now well below the replacement level of 2.1. Households with just one child have become commonplace in Europe and the more prosperous parts of Asia, including China. That means each child has more time, money and energy invested in it, but misses out on the hustle and bustle of a larger household.

Families have also become far more fluid. Rates of marriage have declined steeply, and divorce has become widespread. Many couples in America and Europe now cohabit rather than marry, and a large and growing proportion of children are born out of wedlock. Far more of them, too, are being brought up by lone parents, overwhelmingly mothers, or end up in patchwork families created by new sets of relationships. Again, this happens far more often at the bottom of the social scale than at the top.

At the same time the number of women going out to work has risen steeply, though in recent years the trend has slowed. The post-second-world-war model of the nuclear family with a breadwinner husband, a homemaker wife and several children has become atypical. In America the share of women of working age in the labour force has risen from 42% in 1960 to 68% in 2017. To a greater or lesser extent the same has happened in other rich coun-

Little man or little angel?

How perceptions of childhood have changed through history

For most of Western history, childhood was nasty, brutish and short, or even non-existent. Before modern medicine and public-health standards, many infants did not live to see their first birthday—and if they did, they were expected to grow up at the double. In the two millennia from antiquity to the 17th century, children were mostly seen as imperfect adults. Medieval works of art typically depict them as miniature grown-ups. In 1960 one of the first historians of childhood, Philippe Ariès, declared that in medieval Europe the idea of childhood did not exist. Most people were not even sure of their own age.

For much of that time newborns were considered intrinsically evil, burdened with original sin from which they had to be redeemed through instruction and education. That changed in the 17th century, when children instead began to be seen as innocents who must be protected from harm and corruption by the adult world. Childhood came to be regarded as a separate stage of life. John Locke, a 17th-century English thinker, saw the mind of a newborn child as a blank sheet, to be filled in by its elders and betters. A few decades later Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a Swiss philosopher, argued that children had their own way of seeing, thinking, feeling and reasoning and should be left to develop as nature intended. In the late 18th and early 19th century the Romantics went one better, crediting children with deeper wisdom than adults.

Parents' relative lack of interest in their children in the Middle Ages may have been a rational response to a distressingly high infant mortality rate, reckoned to have been around 200-300 per 1,000 live births in the first year of life, compared with single figures per 1,000 in rich countries now. Many others were wiped out by diseases and accidents before the age of ten. Parents would not want to get too attached to a child who might not be around for long. Besides, in the absence of reliable birth control, families tended to be large,

so less attention would be focused on each individual sibling.

Young children were encouraged to take part in adult activities as soon as they were able, usually starting between the ages of five and seven, and begin to work alongside grown-ups as they became more capable. In agrarian societies they had always been expected to help out at home and in the fields from an early age. In post-revolutionary America they were expected to become independent as soon as possible because labour was in short supply, which made the relationship between the generations less hierarchical than in Europe.

The Industrial Revolution turned children into an indispensable source of income for many poor families, often before they were fully grown. In Britain a parliamentary report in 1818-19 on children in cotton mills around Stockport and Manchester put the average age for starting work at around 11½.

But by the end of the 19th century the state had begun to clamp down on the exploitation of children in the West. Education for the younger age groups became mandatory in ever more countries. Children were seen as in need of protection, and their period of economic dependency lengthened in both Europe and America. The scene was set for the emergence of what Viviana Zelizer, a sociologist at Princeton, has memorably described as "the economically useless but emotionally priceless child".

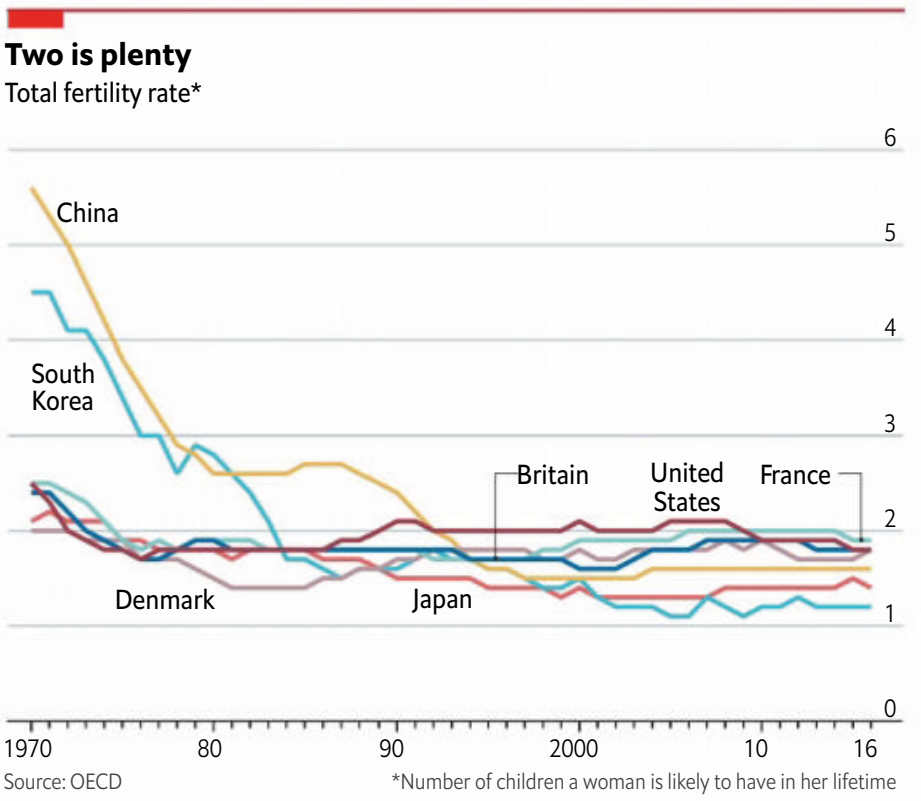
tries. Mothers now mostly return to work within a year or so of giving birth, not five or ten years later. In the absence of a handy grandmother, the child, even at a young age, will probably be looked after outside the home during the working week.

The first few years of a child's life are now receiving more attention as new evidence has emerged about its vital importance in the development of the brain. James Heckman, a Nobel prize-winning American economist, has suggested that early investment in a range of measures from high-quality child care to support programmes for parents offers excellent returns, far better than remedial interventions later in life.

Governments in many countries have started to increase the number of public child-care and kindergarten places to supplement private provision, both to encourage more women to take paid jobs and to promote the development of young children from less privileged backgrounds. This report will look at the wide variety of early-years care on offer in different countries (ranging from plentiful and relatively cheap in the Nordics to scarce and often eye-wateringly expensive in the Anglo-Saxon countries, with most of the rest of Europe somewhere in between), and try to assess what difference it makes. In East Asia this is the first rung of a fiercely competitive educational ladder.

The report will also consider the effect on children of an array of screen-based devices, from televisions to smartphones, offering a feast of passive entertainment, interactive computer games and the opportunity to connect with peers remotely. Not long ago children used to rile their parents by declaring they were bored, but now "being bored is something that never has to be tolerated for a moment", writes Sherry Turkle of MIT, an expert on digital culture. In rich countries the vast majority of 15-year-olds have their own smartphone and spend several hours a day online. There are growing concerns that overuse might lead to addiction and mental illness, and that spending too much time sitting still in front of a screen will stop them from exercising and make them fat. The digital world also harbours new risks, including cyberbullying and sexting.

But the first thing this report will explore is the new face of the institution still central to any child's life: the family. ■



The family

Essential ingredient

Smaller, more heterogeneous, but still indispensable

ON A RAINY Saturday morning, the Museum of Childhood in east London reverberates with the sound of hundreds of small children enjoying themselves. Some are stacking bricks, others are playing in a sandpit as their parents look on. A large Victorian rocking horse attracts a queue of young riders. On a nearby wall a notice outlines a project on which the museum worked with a local school to find out what seven- and eight-year-olds consider important in their lives. The clear winners were the children's families—along with Lego, a construction toy.

The family is still the best place for a child to get the love and security it needs to grow into a well-balanced adult. Child-development experts agree that almost any family, however imperfect, is better than none at all. It does not even have to last for ever, only long enough to provide a safe and warm space for those crucial early years. That is just as well, because today's families are very different from those of a few decades ago.

Most obviously, they are smaller. Across the OECD, the total fertility rate (TFR)—the number of children a woman is likely to have in her lifetime—is now 1.7, against 2.7 in 1970 (see chart). Even America, which until recently used to procreate more than most of the West, is now close to the rich-country average. In South Korea the fall in the TFR has been precipitous, from 4.5 in 1970 to 1.2 now.

The road from five to one

Over the same period China's TFR has plummeted from 5.6 to 1.6. That is often attributed to the country's one-child policy, but the ultra-low birth rates of other countries in the region, including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam, suggest it would have happened anyway, if somewhat later. In 2016 the Chinese government, alarmed by the prospect of a rapid decline in the country's working population, relaxed the rules. That brought a small uptick, but by the following year the numbers were down again. In time the policy is likely be scrapped altogether, but no one expects a baby boom.

Asked what is holding them back from having larger families, Chinese couples often cite the cost of raising children. But the country's increasing urbanisation has also played a part. Many of its modern cities are just as crowded, traffic-ridden, polluted and devoid of green spaces as those in the West, if not more so. They are uninviting places in which to bring up a family.

Both in China and throughout the rich world, couples marry far later than they used to, and have their first child when they are much older. At the start of the 1990s in most OECD countries the mean age of women at first marriage was between 22 and 27, and for men two or three years older; now it is 30 for women and over 32 for men. In Sweden, the place with the oldest brides and grooms, it is 34 and 36 respectively.

And many no longer bother to get married at all. In the past half-century marriage rates in the developed world have roughly halved, though there are big differences between countries, and not necessarily along the lines you might expect. Americans, for example, marry at twice the rate of Italians, French and Spaniards. The Chinese are keenest of all, reflecting a strong aversion to births out of wedlock, for both cultural and practical reasons.

In most rich countries such attitudes are a thing of the past. The average proportion of children born to unmarried parents across the OECD is now around 40%, compared with 7.5% back in 1970 ▸▸

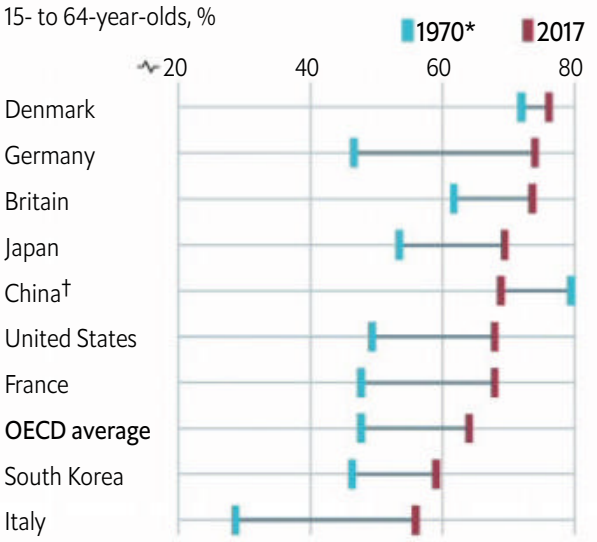
(though numbers in East Asia remain low). In most cases that does not mean they lead chaotic lives. Over 80% of children live in a couple household; the parents may simply have chosen not to get married, or to leave it until later. Quite a few weddings these days feature the couple's offspring as bridesmaids or pageboys.

Still, a growing share of children in OECD countries are being brought up in single-parent households, usually headed by the mother. As a rule, such households are a lot poorer and often less settled than the two-parent kind. In America they account for more than a quarter of the total, and among African-Americans even more. A new class divide is opening up in which well-educated people continue to have conventional marriages and bring up their children within them, whereas those with less education often have unplanned children who grow up in unstable families.

The new normal

Female labour-force participation rate

15- to 64-year-olds, %



Sources: OECD; ILO *Or closest thereafter †Estimates

Parents everywhere split up a lot more often than they used to; divorce rates are typically double those in 1970. Some of them remarry or move in with a new partner, and many children are now part of a patchwork family, perhaps with step-siblings thrown in. Others live with grandparents, other relatives or gay parents. So "home" is different from what it used to be; and with many more mothers going out to work, it may also be empty during the day.

The push of women into the labour force started in America, the Nordics and the Antipodes in the 1960s and gradually spread to other rich countries, with Spain and the Netherlands bringing up the rear. Across the OECD, female labour-force participation has risen from 47.6% in 1970 to 64% now—though in many countries the rise has slowed or even halted as women have found out how hard it can be to combine career and family. In America a big debate was kicked off by an article in the *Atlantic* magazine in 2012 by Anne-Marie Slaughter, an academic and foreign-policy expert who had held down a very senior post in the State Department and was known as a feminist. Entitled "Why women still can't have it all", the article argued that in the face of institutional and cultural barriers, women—and indeed men—still had to make invidious choices between the demands of work and family. Women continue to be expected to play the main carer role, which helps explain why they typically spend far fewer hours than men in formal employment, but many more hours on unpaid child care and domestic tasks—even in places with enlightened men.

One trigger for getting more women into work has been the expansion of tertiary education. In the past couple of decades more women than men have been gaining higher-level qualifications. The growth in services, too, has created many more jobs that appeal to women. And cultural norms are slowly changing. In Germany a woman who worked outside the home while her children were young used to be branded a *Rabenmutter* (raven mother, an undeserved slur on avian parenting styles). But younger Germans, at least, now think it is fine for mothers to have jobs.

Governments can do a great deal to help parents reconcile work and family commitments. The most obvious way is through paid leave round the birth of a baby, though tax policy and cash support can also play a part. Entitlement to maternity leave in rich countries averages about four months, but with wide variations. America is the only wealthy nation to provide no paid maternity leave at all at federal level, though some states and many employers do. Some countries are moving towards the concept of parental leave, with a minimum period reserved for the mother and the rest divided up among the parents as they wish.

Some things don't change

His turn

Where fathers have been offered paternity leave, they have been slow to take it up, for fear that having more than a few days off might harm their career. But if parental leave is offered on a use-it-or-lose basis to the parent who is not the main carer, usually the father, uptake increases, as Germany has been finding after a series of recent reforms.

Getting the father more involved has many benefits. It nudges the mother to go back to work sooner, which makes the family better off and boosts the economy. It is more equitable than to leave all the child care to the mother, and with luck may establish better habits of sharing domestic tasks. And it is good for the psychological well-being of everyone involved. Child and father form a closer relationship, and the mother has a more balanced life if she pursues a career of her own.

Assuming she wants to carry on working, what is top of her wish list? Olivier Thévenon at the OECD studied the effect on female labour-force participation of a range of policies to promote work-life balance, including paid leave, family benefits and tax incentives, and found that one of the most effective ways to get more women to take jobs was to expand child-care provision for the under-threes. That chimes with policymakers' growing focus on the crucial early years of a child's life. ■

Early years

Plastic brains

Catching them young

AT TURNER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL in south-east Washington, DC, about 15 well-turned-out five-year-olds sit on a mat in an immaculate classroom, bellowing out an uplifting song about being ready for school and listening to the teacher. Then they act out little scenes about being good citizens, sharing and helping others. They are having fun, but of a well-controlled sort.

For many of them this may be the calmest and most enjoyable part of their day. The school is in a poor part of America's capital and almost all its students are eligible for free or subsidised meals, which means their parents may struggle to make ends meet. The principal, Eric Bethel, says the school has made a lot of progress and achieves good academic results. It is teaching its preschool kids to read from age three.

The little children at Turner, and many of the District of Columbia's 114 other public schools, are lucky. In 2017 about nine out of ten four-year-olds there, and seven out of ten three-year-olds, were enrolled in publicly funded preschool, the highest rate in America, says Amanda Alexander, the interim chancellor of DC's public-school system. The schools have no trouble recruiting staff for this age group because, unusually, preschool teachers here are paid the same as those for older age groups.

Good preschool education helps get kids from poor families ready for school proper and do better in standardised tests, but it is expensive. In 2017 DC spent about $17,000 per child on this item, far and away the most of any American state. Average preschool spending across America in 2017 was about $5,000, a drop in real terms compared with 2002. Seven states had no programme at all.

Early-childhood education and care is attracting a surge of interest in most rich countries. Increasingly, it is moving out of the home and into institutions, a process experts inelegantly call "defamilisation". Across the OECD, average enrolment of three- to five-year-olds rose from 75% in 2005 to 85% in 2016.

One reason, as already noted, is to make it easier for women to go out to work, which boosts GDP and saves the state money in family support. In some countries this has been an explicit policy objective. Britain, for example, some years ago introduced free child care for 15 hours a week, and of 30 hours a week provided the parents work, for all three- and four-year-olds, regardless of background. But a paper by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, a think-tank, found that this was likely to have only a slight impact on maternal employment. Even 30 hours a week would not be long enough to squeeze in a full-time job.

Kate Greenaway Nursery School, run by the local authority in Islington, North London, is a confidence-inspiring place full of happy, busy children. It is open weekdays from 8am to 6pm, including holidays, so it provides effective cover for working families. As well as taking three-and-four-year-olds, it offers subsidised places for kids from six months to three years. These cost from £125 to £300 a week, depending on what parents earn. The head, Fiona Godfrey, says the places for younger children are in high demand. Good-quality private nurseries can cost even more and offer less. Child-care costs in Britain as a proportion of average incomes are among the world's highest (see chart).

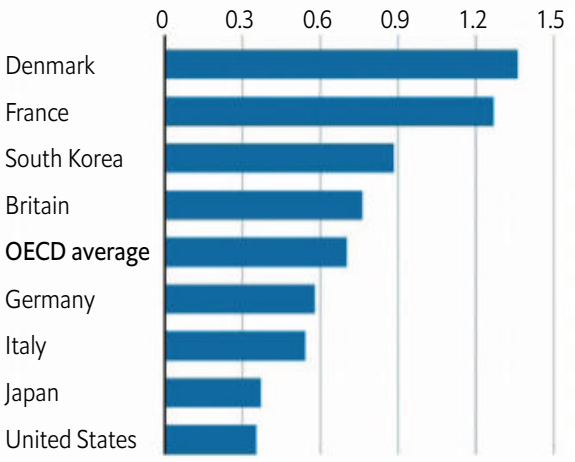
In France, the ubiquitous, subsidised *écoles maternelles*, which take children from the age of two, have long been the envy of working mothers elsewhere in Europe; and Germany has recently increased the number of child-care places for younger children, though provision is patchy. Sabine Bermann, head of a heavily oversubscribed *Kita* (Kindertagesstätte, or child day-care centre) in Berlin's rapidly gentrifying Prenzlauer Berg district, explains that parents have a legal right to a place for any child over the age of one. In Berlin they pay only for meals; some other German *Länder* (states) make charges ranging from modest to quite steep. But the promise rings hollow because the better *Kitas* have long waiting lists.

Early-childhood education is attracting a surge of interest

Denmark, along with other Nordics, had the debate about institutional care for young children 30 or 40 years ago and decided to make it universal, says Charlotte Ringsmose, who teaches pedagogy at Aarhus University. Attendance at preschool centres and kindergartens among three- to six-year-olds is around 98%. Danish child-care centres focus on play rather than formal tuition. Children do not learn to read until they start school proper at six, but then catch up fast. And Danes do not shop around for early-years child care because the nearest state-run place is usually just fine. Kids from the least well-off families go free, and even those with ▸▸

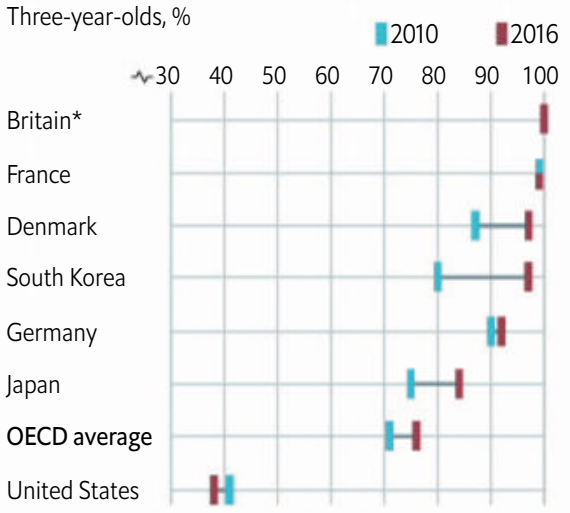
Dear little ones

Government spending on early-childhood education and care, 2013, % of GDP

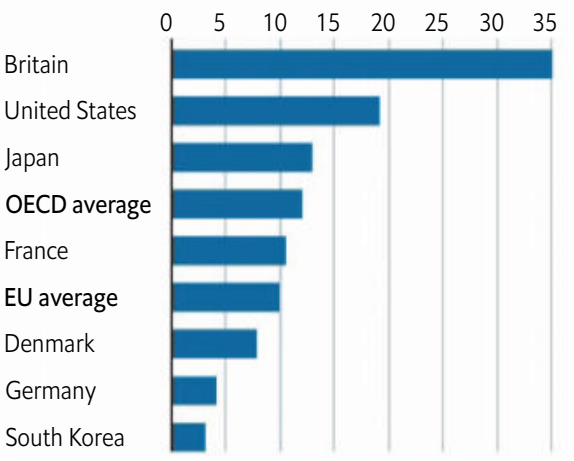


Source: OECD

Enrolment in early-childhood education
Three-year-olds, %



Net child-care costs†
% of net family income, 2015



*No data 2010 †For two children aged two and three, 40 hours per week

So far, so good

richer parents are heavily subsidised. Perhaps not coincidentally, both fertility rates and female labour-market-participation rates in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries—which have similar arrangements—are above the European average.

But Denmark's universal child-care provision also has a more ideological side to it. The idea is to make sure that all children, whatever their background, are steeped in the country's language, culture and values early enough to shape them for life. Last year the (right-wing) government controversially introduced legislation to require children living in designated poor neighbourhoods inhabited mainly by immigrants, which it calls "ghettos", to attend day care for at least 25 hours a week from the age of one.

Recent advances in neurology and child psychology have shown that the period from birth to age five, when the brain is at its most plastic, is the most important in a child's development, and that interventions during that period can be much more effective than later ones. Children from prosperous, educated backgrounds start off with a huge advantage because they already get a lot of stimulation and informal learning at home. But institutional early education and care, if done right, can help level the playing field for those from less privileged backgrounds.

The doyen of this school of thought is James Heckman of the University of Chicago, who has long argued that government investment in early childhood in institutional care pays off both for individuals and for society at large. He calculates the return on investment in high-quality birth-to-five education at between 7% and 13%. In evidence he cites two long-term studies of children from poor homes that began decades ago, the Perry Preschool Project in Michigan and the Abecedarian Project in North Carolina, which suggest that offering extra support for such children pays off not just in academic results but also in social and economic outcomes: better health, less poverty, less crime.

As a follow-up, Mr Heckman and colleagues evaluated a raft of other American early-childhood education programmes. These included Head Start, a long-standing federal preschool programme designed to get poorer kids ready for school, which had been criticised by other scholars because the academic improvements it achieved seemed to fade over time. But Mr Heckman's team reckoned that taking part in the programme did help the children in other ways, fostering social and emotional skills that turned out to be important in later life.

Isabel Sawhill and Quentin Karpilow at the Brookings Institution, a think-tank, studied a representative group of American children, tracking their progress from the earliest years through school and beyond. They, too, found that well-targeted interventions—such as providing advice for parents and extra support for struggling children—improved the chances of disadvantaged kids becoming middle class when they grow up. Getting in early was crucial, and the best results were achieved by intervening several times from early childhood to early adulthood. The resulting boost to the incomes of those children in later life was about ten times greater than the cost of the programmes.

The fortunate few

On the other side of the world, in a suburb of Shanghai, the children on one of the campuses of the Fortune kindergarten are just finishing lunch. The menu alternates daily between Chinese and Western; today it is Chinese food, which seems popular. Later they will take a walk outside and listen to stories, followed by a nap, and then end their school day with games or free play.

Fortune is considered one of the best kindergartens in Shanghai. It is a private establishment with around 3,000 places for children aged from 18 months to six years, scattered among various campuses across the city. Competition to get in is fierce. Local parents are subsidised by the government, but for others, fees for the most expensive package can run to 15,000 yuan ($2,200, £1,700) a month. That buys you bilingual, bicultural teaching in Mandarin and English and even includes philosophy classes for five- to six-year-olds, explains Stephen Walshe, Fortune's Irish co-principal.

Most important, though, it offers a head start in a highly competitive system leading from kindergarten to primary, middle and senior school and eventually on to university. Better-off mothers often stop work for a while to make sure their child reaches that vital first rung on the educational ladder. For ambitious Chinese parents, formal learning cannot start soon enough. ■

Digital media

Primal screens

Parents may loathe them, but they are here to stay

"TURN OFF media, turn on life", urges the promotional video from South Korea's Nori Media Education Centre for the Prevention of Internet Addiction, an organisation funded by a mixture of private and public money. Its manager, Kwon Jang-hee, is passionate about protecting children from the ill effects of the internet, and above all of smartphones, which he considers most damaging of all because of their omnipresence. Parents do not understand how dangerous the internet is, he says, pointing to a study by Seoul National University that detected similarities between the brain activity of cocaine addicts and computer-games enthusiasts. If he had his way, youngsters would have to wait for their smartphones until they had graduated from high school.

In one of the world's most highly connected societies there is little chance that he will get his wish, but plenty of South Korean parents agree that their children are overdosing on screens. A recent government survey on smartphone and internet addiction put the share of three- to nine-year-olds at high risk of addiction at 1.2% and that of teenagers at 3.5%. That may not seem a lot, but when it happens the effects can be devastating. Some of these chil-

dren are on their phones for at least eight hours a day and lose interest in offline life. Having tried and failed to wean them from their devices, their desperate parents turn to the government, which offers various kinds of counselling, therapy and, in extreme cases, remedial boot camps.

Hong Hyun-joo, who works on the boot-camp programme for the regional government of Gyeonggi, South Korea's most populous province, says the kids undergoing the treatment are usually aged 14-16, with about the same number of boys and girls. They hand in their smartphones when they arrive at the boot camp and spend 12 days living in dormitories, eating regular meals and engaging in lots of sport and group activities. The aim is to increase their self-esteem and get them to make friends. They mostly start off sullen but gradually become more co-operative. The claimed "cure" rate (meaning a return to more normal usage) is 70-75%. But the camps can take only a few hundred children a year, not remotely enough to meet demand. That would take a lot more money.

South Korea is thought to have the world's highest rate of problematic internet use among both children and adults, but concern about children's growing use of digital media in the West is also rising, especially in America. In 2015, the latest year for which internationally comparable figures are available, nine out of ten 15-year-olds across the OECD had access to a smartphone. They spent an average of 18½ hours a week online, nearly five hours more than in 2012, so the figure is probably even higher now. About 16% of these kids were extreme users, defined as spending more than six hours a day online. The number of children who did not use the internet at all was vanishingly small.

Square-eyed babies

Moreover, children are starting on digital devices at ever younger ages. In Germany 67% of 10- to 11-year-olds already have their own smartphones, rising to 88% for 12- to 13-year-olds, according to Bitkom, an industry association. In Britain 83% of 11- to 12-year-olds and 96% of 13- to 14-year-olds have their own phones, says Childwise, a research outfit. What do these kids do on their smartphones? "Stuff," says John, a 12-year-old living in north London. That turns out to mean sending messages and talking to his friends, watching video clips, playing computer games and going on Snapchat and Instagram. His ten-year-old sister does not have a smartphone yet, but uses an internet-enabled iPad. Their parents ration the children's screen time (as the vast majority of parents do), but sometimes there is room for negotiation.

Infants and toddlers use digital devices such as tablets when they can barely speak, let alone read and write. The American Academy of Paediatrics used to advise parents to keep children under two away from screens altogether, but now says that video chatting is acceptable even for the very young. For two- to five-year-olds, it reckons, an hour a day of high-quality programming is fine. Some experts think it is still being way too conservative.

Opinions on the effects of children's digital-media habits are deeply polarised. At one extreme, Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University, says it all with the title of her recent book, "iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us". The smartphone, she argues, has radically changed the lives of the generation of American children born between 1995 and 2012, wherever they live and whatever their background. She thinks excessive use of the internet and social media makes them lonely and depressed and poses serious risks to their physical and particularly their mental health, sometimes to the point of driving them to suicide.

Opinions on children's digital-media habits are deeply polarised

Others note that similar warnings were sounded when television started to spread in the second half of the 20th century. At the time it was widely believed that if children spent long hours watching it every day, they would become dumb, fat and lazy. Now watching TV together is seen as a valuable family activity for parents and children. When technologies such as the radio, the written word or printed books were new, they were also demonised to begin with.

Some of the risks attached to internet use have barely started to be considered. For example, children are already generating large amounts of data, beginning when they are still in the womb as their parents put the first scan of the baby online, and continuing across multiple channels as the child is constantly recorded interacting with devices and programmes. These data can never be retracted. They will be available to third parties and there is no telling how they will be used. The effects may not become clear until many years after the event, says Monica Bulger of Data & Society, a research organisation that studies the social and cultural impact of data-heavy technologies.

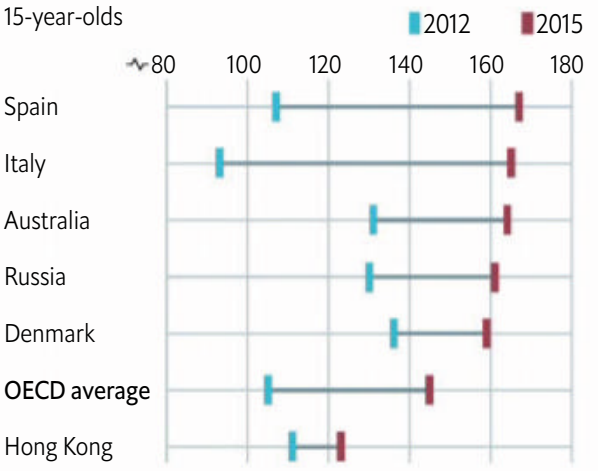
Its founder, Danah Boyd, in a book called "It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens", concedes that spending too much time online can be bad for adolescents, if only because it leaves less time for other activities. But she also argues that since most young people these days have fewer opportunities and less time to get out and see their friends, they need somewhere else to talk among themselves in private. The internet offers them such a forum. Certainly the youngsters themselves seem to appreciate it. Across the OECD, 84% of 15-year-olds say they find social networks online very useful, and more than half of them feel bad if they cannot get online.

Daniel Kardefelt-Winther of the Innocenti research office of Unicef, the United Nations' children's agency, looked at all the evidence he could find on how children's use of digital technology affected their mental well-being, their social relationships and their physical activity, and found less cause for alarm than is often suggested. Most of the studies he examined seem to show that the technology helps children stay in touch with their friends and make new ones. In the 1990s and early 2000s, when the internet was relatively new, such benefits seemed less clear because it seemed to isolate people, but now that almost everybody is online, it has become a busy and sociable place.

Irresistible attraction

Minutes per weekday spent online outside school

15-year-olds



Source: OECD

What spending so much time looking at screens does to children's health is hard to gauge. Although it clearly reduces physical activity, which may be bad for their general well-being and cause weight gain, the causal direction is not clear. It may be that children put on weight because they eat too much unhealthy food, perhaps egged on by advertising they have seen on some screen or other, and become less active as a result.

The relationship between the use of digital technology and children's mental health, broadly speaking, appears to be U-shaped. Researchers have found that moderate use is beneficial, whereas either no use at all or extreme use could be harmful.

Born to swipe

But in either case the effects are very small, and children generally prove surprisingly resilient to moderate or even high levels of screen time. Although there are clear instances of overuse, terms like "addiction" or "compulsive use" may be overblown. There is no real evidence that spending too much time online severely impairs the user's life in the longer term, as drug abuse often does.

No time to sleep

This is not to say that there is no need for concern. Mental-health problems represent the largest burden of disease among young people. One study across ten OECD countries found that a quarter of all young people had a mental disorder. Even a small addition to that share would be a bad thing. And heavy users of social media and video games often suffer from sleep deprivation, which seems to be associated with anxiety and depression. But again it is not clear which is the cause and which the effect.

Cyberbullying is also becoming more prevalent, though it directly affects a relatively small proportion of children, and experts think it is generally less damaging than the physical kind. And people on social media try to make their lives seem more glamorous than they really are, which can make children feel left out.

Sonia Livingstone, a professor of social psychology at the London School of Economics, has spent decades looking at the relationship between children, media and the internet. She concludes that screens are often held responsible for the broader anxieties of parents living in a high-stress environment, without much evidence that they do great harm. What worries her more is that screens are becoming part of the middle-class armoury for perpetuating social advantage, with children from well-off homes being enrolled in private classes to learn skills like "How to be a YouTuber", which poorer parents cannot afford. That echoes concerns across the Atlantic about child-rearing becoming a new battleground for class warfare.

It is hard to be categorical about screen use. What is good for one child of a particular age may be bad for another one of a different age. But it is clear that, particularly for younger children, it helps if parents are engaged. Watching a video together or looking something up online and talking about it is not that different from reading a book together. The trouble is that children can find it hard to get any attention from their parents these days because they, too, are always on their smartphones. ■

Parenting

A never-ending task

Fewer kids can be a lot more work

"We are creating a miniature version of our own lives for our kid, wanting him to be productive, keeping him busy all the time." Abigail is talking about her two-year-old son, Joshua. She has a well-paid job with an investment bank in Dallas, Texas, which she finds stressful but exciting. Now pregnant with another child, she has every intention of resuming work after the second birth. She will keep on her Mexican-American nanny, and her writer husband will help with the child care.

But combining work with a larger family will not be easy, not just because of Abigail's demanding job but because she and her husband, like many other prosperous parents in America, pursue a form of child-rearing that makes huge demands on their time and resources. It includes filling the child's day with round-the-clock activities, from music and sports to sleepovers; going to great lengths to get him or her into the right schools; and strictly supervising homework. The parents may not like it, but they feel they have no choice because all their friends are doing the same thing.

This is colloquially known as "helicopter parenting" (because the parents are always hovering), or "concerted cultivation", a term coined by Annette Lareau, a sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania. In her book "Unequal Childhoods", based on in-depth studies conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s, she looked at the child-rearing habits of American families from a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds and found a yawning gap. Whereas better-off, better-educated parents (black as well as white) overwhelmingly adopted this intensive method, working-class and poor families followed a different model which she calls "the accomplishment of natural growth". They saw their role as providing shelter, food, comfort and other basic support but lacked the time, the money and the nous for such intensive management, so their kids were often left to their own devices, and the extended family played a much greater part in their children's lives than among Ms Lareau's middle-class subjects.

In his book "Our Kids", Robert Putnam, a political scientist at Harvard, used a mixture of interviews and data analysis to argue that different child-raising conventions are reinforcing a growing divide in American society. The privileged top third is pulling ever further ahead of the disadvantaged bottom third, whose families are often fractured and whose lives tend to be precarious. That shows up as a growing divergence in income, education, single-parenthood, friendship networks and other indicators.

The power of words

Upper-middle-class children are far better placed even before their parents make any special effort, simply because of the sort of homes they are born into. Educated parents tend to respond readily to their children's endless questions, talk to them over the dinner table and take them to new and exciting places. In a famous study in the 1990s, Betty Hart and Todd Risley from the University of Kansas found that in the poorest families children heard about 600 words an hour, whereas in professional families they heard 2,100. By the time they were three, the children from the well-off homes had heard around 30m more words than the poorer ones.

"Parenting", in the sense that it is now understood, is a relatively new term; it first popped up in 1958, according to the Merriam- ▸▸

Webster dictionary, and came into widespread use only in the 1970s. Experts see it as an important factor in successful child-rearing, along with things such as genetic predisposition and external circumstances. To find out how much it mattered, Jane Waldfogel of Columbia University and Liz Washbrook of the University of Bristol separated out the effects of different parenting styles and home learning environments on the cognitive performance of three- to five-year-olds from different income groups in America and Britain. They found that they accounted for between a third and half of the income-related gap.

Studies show that even poorer and less well-educated parents on both sides of the Atlantic (except, oddly, in France) spent far more time with their children every day in the 2000s than they did in 1965. They also spent more money on them, both in dollars and as a proportion of their income. Sabino Kornrich of Emory University and Frank Furstenberg of the University of Pennsylvania found that between 1972-73 and 2006-07 total spending per child in constant dollars increased somewhat for all income groups (see chart), but far faster for the richest 10% of parents than for the rest. Because incomes in this group had gone up rapidly, their spending as a proportion of income did not rise much. Yet by this measure the poorest 10% of parents vastly increased their spending on their children because their incomes had barely budged.

America is not the only place to practise helicopter parenting. The British do it too, calling it "hothousing"; continental Europe less so, especially in the Nordic countries, where social hierarchies are flatter and parents more relaxed. But globalisation has cranked up competition for the best jobs, and academic standards in different countries have become easier to compare thanks to the OECD's PISA scores, which measure the reading, maths and science performance of 15-year-olds. Such comparisons have highlighted the effectiveness of a kind of concerted cultivation that is ubiquitous in East Asia. It is somewhat different from the Western sort, being directed more single-mindedly towards academic success, and works particularly well in maths and science. In the PISA rankings for these subjects in 2015 Singapore tops the bill, and Japan, China (currently measured only in Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu and Guangdong) and South Korea are all well ahead of America.

Such comparisons have made some Americans wonder whether they are being too soft on their kids. For all the hovering they do, they tend to let them off lightly on things like discipline and helping around the house, preferring to build up their self-esteem and keep them happy. But parents have noticed that some of the country's recent immigrants, particularly those from East Asia, use sterner methods to great effect. In her book "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother", Amy Chua, a first-generation Chinese-American married to an American academic, describes the tough love she meted out to her two daughters. She unapologetically made the girls do many hours of homework a day, pushed them into becoming musical prodigies and allowed them next to no time to have fun. Though one of them eventually rebelled, both achieved brilliant academic results and seem to have grown into accomplished adults.

Another Chinese-American mother, Lenora Chu, and her journalist husband tried a different variant of blended cultures. Having moved to Shanghai, the couple decided to send their three-year-old son to a top-notch state-run Chinese kindergarten. Ms Chu's book about their experience is called "Little Soldiers", after a song often recited in the kindergarten that started: "I am a little soldier, I practise every day." It summed up the educational philosophy prevailing there and across China: anyone can succeed at anything if they work at it hard enough, whether or not they have a talent for it. Effort is all.

The Chinese kindergarten, Ms Chu found, had little trouble securing co-operation and compliance from the children and their parents. The authoritarian structure of the education system and powerful administrators keeps parents and students in check. In turn, the kindergarten proved responsive to parental pressure to offer some formal teaching even to these very young children, despite consistent guidance from the ministry of education that this age group should be spending most of the day playing. Even at kindergarten level, the parents are already thinking about getting the child through the *gaokao*, the all-important university entrance exam. As one mother explains, this is not just about the child itself. The Chinese have long been obsessed with education, and academic success for the child brings honour to the entire family.

"Parenting" first popped up in 1958

If life at school is not much fun for Chinese kids, it is even worse for South Korean ones. Though both countries put much store by rote learning, in South Korea this takes on extreme forms. Jang Hyung-shim, an educational psychologist at Seoul's Hanyang University, likens children's experience at school to military service and says it stifles their creativity.

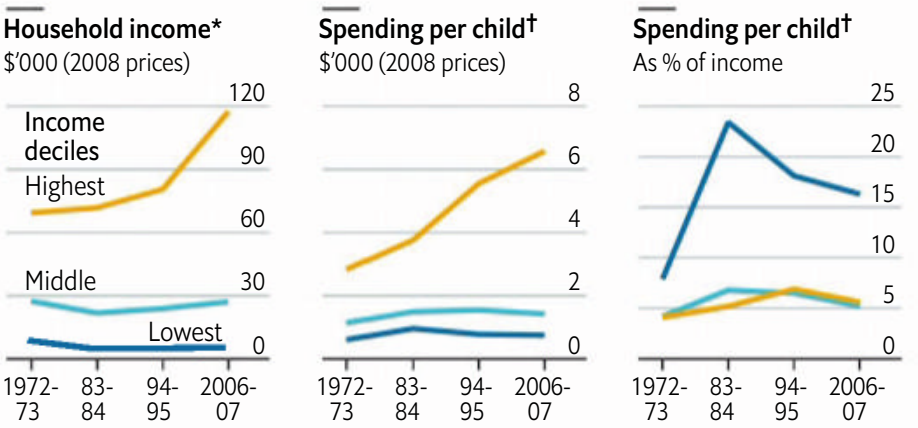
The curse of the hakwon

Song In-soo leads a group that campaigns for educational reform, the No Worry Private Education Association, which has gained a formidable reputation and chalked up a few successes, including a slight relaxation of the high-school entrance exam. He is particularly concerned about the high suicide rate among schoolchildren, partly blaming the ubiquitous *hakwon*, or private crammers, which he says 60% of South Korean students attend. The *hakwon* lessons take place outside school hours and often go on until late at night, turning the children into overworked, sleep-deprived zombies—as well as exacting a heavy financial toll on their parents. Mr Song has assembled lots of evidence against the practice. But as in China, everything hinges on the university entrance exam, so until that is tackled, nothing is likely to change.

In a little forest growing on one of the many rocky outcrops found all over Seoul, groups of tiny children from various local nursery schools are arriving at a "forest experience centre", one of 50 in this city of about 10m. They come once a week to explore discovery trails on the steep paths, play on various bits of equipment, listen to a guide explaining the wildlife they might see and exclaim at "bug hotels" full of insects. They seem delighted to be there. As wild places go, this is pretty tame; the paths may be steep, but all the play equipment is designed to minimise risk, and the children are carefully supervised. Even so, some parents stop their offspring from taking part in these excursions for fear that they might get hurt. In South Korea, not having fun starts early. ■

Watch your investment grow

United States, household income and spending on children, by income decile



Source: "Investing in children: Changes in parental spending on children", by Sabino Kornrich and Frank Furstenberg

*One-person equivalent †Education, child care and children's accessories

An unfair world

Conkering inequalities

How to help level the playing field

BRITISH CHILDREN used to play conkers in the autumn when the horse-chestnut trees started to drop their shiny brown nuts. They would select a suitable chestnut, drill a hole in it and thread it onto a string, then swing their conker at that of an opponent until one of them broke. But the game has fallen out of favour. Children spend less time outdoors and rarely have access to chestnut trees. Besides, many schools have banned conkers games, worried that they might cause injuries or trigger nut allergies.

That sort of risk-averseness now pervades every aspect of childhood. Playgrounds have all the excitement designed out of them to make them safe. Many governments, particularly in litigious societies such as America, have tightened up their rules, requiring parents to supervise young children far more closely than in the past. Frank Furedi of the University of Kent, a critical commentator on modern parenting, argues that "allowing children to play unsupervised or leaving them at home alone is increasingly portrayed as a symptom of irresponsible parenting."

In part, such increased caution is a response to the huge wave of changes outlined in this report. Large-scale urbanisation, smaller and more fluid families, the move of women into the labour market and the digitisation of many aspects of life have inevitably changed the way that people bring up their children. There is little prospect that any of these trends will be reversed, so today's more intensive parenting style is likely to persist.

But the child-rearing practices now embraced by affluent parents in many parts of the rich world, particularly in America, go far beyond an adjustment to changes in external conditions. They amount to a strong bid to ensure that the advantages enjoyed by the parents' generation are passed on to their offspring. Since success in life now turns mainly on education, such parents will do their utmost to provide their children with the schooling, the character training and the social skills that will secure access to the best universities and later the most attractive jobs.

To some extent that has always been the case. But there are more such parents now, and they are competing with each other for what economists call "positional goods"—things that are in limited supply and that money cannot always buy, like those places at top universities. This competition starts even before the children are born. The prosperous classes will take their time to select a suitable spouse and get married, and will start a family only when they feel ready for it.

Social divisions

Children from less advantaged backgrounds, by contrast, often appear before their parents are ready for them. In America 60% of births to single women under 30 are unplanned, and over 40% of children are born outside marriage. And even if those children have two resident parents who are doing their best for them, they are still handicapped by a lack of funds, knowledge and connections. The result, certainly in America, has been to widen already massive social inequalities yet further.

What can be done about this? All the evidence suggests that children from poorer backgrounds are at a disadvantage almost as soon as they are born. By the age of five or six they are far less "school-ready" than their better-off peers, so any attempts to help them catch up have to start long before they get to school. America has had some success with various schemes involving regular home visits by nurses or social workers to low-income families with new babies. It also has long experience with programmes for young children from poor families that combine support for parents with good-quality child care. Such programmes do seem to make a difference. Without extra effort, children from low-income families in most countries are much less likely than their better-off peers to attend preschool education, even though they are more likely to benefit from it. And data from the OECD's PISA programme suggest that children need at least two years of early (preschool) education to perform at their best when they are 15.

So the most promising way to ensure greater equity may be to make early-years education and care far more widely available and more affordable, as it is in the Nordics. Some governments are already rethinking their educational priorities, shifting some of their spending to the early years.

Most rich countries decided more than a century ago that free, compulsory education for all children was a worthwhile investment for society. Since then the school-leaving age has repeatedly been raised. There is now an argument for starting preschool education earlier, as some countries have already done. Before the Industrial Revolution it was the whole village that minded the children, not individual parents. In the face of crushing new inequalities, a modern version of that approach is worth trying. ■

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